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***Amir Arsalan* and the Question of Genre**

When a historian decides to use literary texts to help construct a past, these texts can present some interesting theoretical and methodological problems. One theoretical question that concerns both historians and literary scholars is that of genre. Generic considerations are of primary importance for the historian as he or she sifts through such diverse kinds of material as personal diaries, government documents, field reports of inspection teams, and books of doctrine or practice. The historian knows what to expect of each sort of document and by virtue of this familiarity is able to notice, for example, unexpected additions, omissions, or subtle deviations from the expected norms. This awareness of generic considerations often becomes second nature to us as we work with familiar types of material.

But, alas, the specialized fields and disciplinary training of historians and literary scholars can obscure for them the generic characteristics of texts that they do not ordinarily work with. Thus it is possible for scholars in both fields to overlook or misinterpret texts that could enrich their understanding of the period or intellectual climate that interests them. It is in this regard that I would like to discuss the book *Amir Arsalan*.

Amir Arsalan is a romance in the popular style. One characteristic of such romances is that they are composed in the simple and conversational prose of a *naqqāl* or professional storyteller. This use of language sets the popular romances apart from the courtly verse romances of Nizami, Amir Khosrow, Jami, and other poets of the high literary tradition. The circumstances of the composition of *Amir Arsalan* are known well: it was created by Mirza Mohammad 'Ali Naqib al-mamalek, the court storyteller or *naqqāl bāshī* of Naser al-din Shah, and written down by Fakhr al-dowleh, a daughter of the shah. It is reported by Mohammad Ja'far Mahjub, editor of the standard edition of *Amir Arsalan* that Fakhr al-dowleh would sit outside the door of the shah's sleeping quarters in the evening when the *naqqāl bāshī* would tell an installment of the story to the shah, and write down what she heard. The narration was first completed in 1292/1875. Printed editions soon became available and in a short time the story became popular both with readers and with those who frequented coffee-houses and listened to the professional storytellers who narrated it there. Mahjub has provided an extensive introduction to his edition which deals with the language of the text, the nature of its composition, and its place in the literary tradition.¹

Amir Arsalan belongs to a genre of popular prose romances that includes *Dārāb nāma*, *Firūz Shāh nāma*, *Samak-e 'Ayyār*, *Romūz-e Ḥamza*, and numerous

1. Mohammad 'Ali, Naqib al-mamalek, *Amir Arsalan*, ed. Mohammad Ja'far Mahjub (Tehran, 1340 S./1961).

others. These romances have been told and read in Iran since before Safavid times, and they were popular throughout the Persian-speaking world. They flourished in the subcontinent, for example, in Persian, Urdu, Hindi, and other languages of the Moghul empire and certain ones are still popular in India, Pakistan, and Central Asia today.² We know that some of these romances were popular in court circles as well as with the general public, and this fact provides further evidence for the interaction of popular and courtly literary culture. *Amir Arsalān* is a good example of this interaction, and is the only romance of its genre that we know was actually composed in a court for a monarch.

What does it mean to call a text a romance, and what are the generic implications of this for the historian? These are the principal questions that this article will address. Broadly speaking, the romance genre in Persian literature portrays a hero's social and moral development from the stage of adolescence to that of maturity. The hero is usually a prince. The tale covers a relatively short span of time, often only four or five years, but takes place across a huge geographical range. The most common story type, especially among the popular prose romances, is one in which the hero travels around most of the known world in pursuit of his beloved, who has generally been carried off by an evil villain. An important part of this "grand tour" is a journey out of the world of humans into a magical world of *paris*, jinns, or other supernatural beings.³ While describing the hero's journey across the world, the romance also depicts his inner journey toward social and moral maturity and the willingness to accept the responsibilities of adult life. In other words, the underlying moral purpose of the romance is to present a model for the education of a prince to become a king. During this eventful journey the hero and sometimes the heroine undergo many trials and challenges to their physical courage and moral fiber. The romance typically ends with the hero being reunited with his beloved. They then marry, and he accepts the throne of his kingdom from his aged father. The new king and queen rule in peace and prosperity for the rest of their long lives. There are some variants on this basic pattern but the didactic purpose served by the romance, whatever the tale type, is almost always the same.

Amir Arsalān tells the story of a prince of Rum and his pursuit of his beloved Farrokh Leqa. The kingdom of Rum is conquered by the king of Farang. The Rumi king, Malek Shah, is killed but his queen, who is pregnant, escapes. She is found by a rich Egyptian merchant who falls in love with her and takes her back to Egypt where he marries her. There she gives birth to a son whom they name Amir Arsalan. The child shows all the conventional signs of royal blood: radiant beauty, large physical size, great strength, and a quick mind. The boy is

2. E.g., *Dostoni Amir Hamza* (Dushanbe: Niyaz, 1992). See also Frances W. Pritchett, *The Romance Tradition in Urdu: Adventures from the Dastan of Amir Hamza* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), and her *Marvelous Encounters: Folk Romance in Urdu and Hindi* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1985).

3. A recent example of this sort of romance is the novel *King of the Benighted* by Manuchehr Irani (Washington, D.C.: Mage, 1991). The author uses the first tale of Nizami's *Haft paykar* as the basic structure of the narrative, but transposes it to modern-day Tehran.

educated to be a merchant, but has a talent for languages and quickly becomes fluent in five of them. He resists his father's pressure to take up the mercantile life and demands to have a horse and to be trained in martial skills, again evidence of his royal lineage. After learning his true identity, he falls in love with Farrokh Leqa from seeing her portrait, and leaves home secretly to find her. She is the daughter of Petrus Shah, king of Farang.

Amir Arsalan conquers the kingdom of Rum and assumes its throne, but after two weeks he is restless and bored with court life and he sets out for the kingdom of Farang to find Farrokh Leqa. He has now properly embarked on his world journey, and it is filled with triumphs, defeats, close calls, and adventures of all sorts. His travels take him to the land of the *parīs*, where he spends a long time surmounting a complicated set of trials and challenges that prevent him from freeing Farrokh Leqa and taking her back to her homeland. He is successful in all his endeavors in the supernatural world, and reenters the world of humans where he must resolve a further set of complications. In the end he defeats all his enemies, is reunited with Farrokh Leqa, marries her with everybody's blessings, assumes again the throne of Rum, and rules peacefully and happily for the rest of his life.

This summary does scant justice to the colorful, fast-paced events of the tale. Mahjub's edition runs to more than five hundred pages and there is hardly a paragraph in which something does not happen to advance the plot. From this abundance of detail, we must try to extract a picture of Amir Arsalan as an adolescent prince undergoing his transition to adulthood, and the principles that govern this process. The narrator develops his portrayal of Amir Arsalan by the familiar processes of telling, showing, and contrast.

The education of princes, and their conduct once they take the throne as kings, have been important matters of concern for Persians since long before the coming of Islam. These themes appear in pre-Islamic Pahlavi texts referred to as *andarz* literature, and in a variety of contexts in Persian literature: the *Shāhnāma*, "mirrors for princes," courtly works on ethics, popular didactic works such as *Golestān* and *Būstān*, Sufi tales, and the rich source that is generally overlooked, romances.⁴ By and large, we can say that the conventional model for the education of princes that we find in the texts other than romances stresses that the king's moral authority is based on his wisdom and justice. The romances present a somewhat different model.

The main Islamic Persian sources for the education and performance of kings begin with *Shāhnāma*. Ferdowsi presents varying formulas but they all appear to stress three qualities necessary in kings: *nezhād*, *gowhar*, and *honar*. *Nezhād* is one's lineage, and fitness to rule was thought to be an inherited quality in kings. *Gowhar* is one's personal nature, the qualities one is endowed with by God.

4. For a survey of this literature, see Ch.-H. de Fouchécour, *Moralia: les notions morales dans la littérature persane du 3e/9e au 7e/13e siècle* (Paris: Éditions Recherché sur les Civilisations, 1986).

Honar is what one learns from others in the course of theoretical and practical education. Ferdowsi enunciates these principles clearly in a passage at the beginning of the reign of Kay Khosrow.⁵ These qualities of the individual are developed in various contexts to encompass martial and diplomatic skills, and a clear sense that the king's moral authority is based on wisdom, justice, and a sense of responsibility for his subjects. Always present is the legitimizing *farr*. *Siyār al-molūk*, *Naṣīḥat al-molūk*, *Baḥr al-fawā'id*, other "mirrors for princes," and the writings on political philosophy present a more abstract or theoretical model for the making and performance of kings, telling us how children should be educated, the qualities required in a king, and how he should behave, rather than showing us the prince in the process of learning. *Qābūs nāma*, *Golestān*, and *Būstān* contain a more practical sort of wisdom. The courtly romances such as *Haft paykar* sometimes show a king in the making, but are written in a refined and elevated language for the educated, courtly class. All of these texts would have been familiar to an educated Persian. But what sources would have contributed to the ideas of the general population about the making and performance of kings? I suggest that these would be sources likely to have been related orally; *Shāhnāma* and the popular prose romances such as *Amīr Hamza* and *Amīr Arsalān*.

When *naqqāls* relate what they call *Shāhnāma*, it is not always Ferdowsi's version of the national legend.⁶ Whatever the version may be, however, it takes place in the same moral world. Traditionally *naqqāls* also told romances such as *Amīr Hamza* or *Amīr Arsalān* in addition to stories from *Shāhnāma*. Through this means the unlettered, uneducated public became familiar with many of the generic conventions of the romance. These conventions would have included signs of the hero's legitimacy as a ruler such as his auspicious birth; his physical and intellectual superiority over other youths; the inability to hide his handsome physical appearance which betokened royal blood; his extraordinary strength, bravery, and fighting skill; and divine intervention in his favor in times of crisis. There would also have been accounts of the hero's conquest of magic and sorcery in the human world, his journey to a supernatural world, his innate sense that he should never use his superior strength for unjust purposes, and his single-minded pursuit of his beloved in the face of all obstacles. In the case of *Amīr Arsalān* the hero also shows a number of individual characteristics that make this an interesting example of the genre of popular romances.

As pointed out above, we expect the hero of a romance to undergo a process of moral and social maturation during the course of his adventures. The career of the prince Amir Arsalan shows well how this process of change is presented in popular literature. What does Amir Arsalan learn as he matures intellectually and morally? First, he learns to consider the consequences of his actions before acting. As an 18-year old, he seems to know instinctively (because of his *nezhād*) how to administer justice in his court. However, he roughly brushes

5. *Shāhnāma*, ed. E. Bertels et al., 9 vols. (Moscow: Nauka, 1966–71), 4: 8–9.

6. See Mary Ellen Page, "Naqqali and Ferdowsi," Ph.D. dissertation, (University of Pennsylvania, 1977).

aside the advice of a vizier who warns him of the dangers of going abroad alone, thus violating one of the theoretical principles of kingship, i.e., heed the advice of wise advisors. He learns the value of sound advice only after much pain brought on by his own headstrong actions. Second, toward the end of his adventures, he has learned to consider not only his own future but that of those dependent on him, and he gives careful instructions to his vizier for the care of Farrokh Leqa should he not return from his quest. Third, he learns the value of telling the truth. During his early adventures he consistently lies about his identity, pretending that he is the son of a merchant and not a prince. Sometimes this is actually "prudent dissimulation," but at other times he could have saved himself serious trouble by admitting who he was. Toward the end of the tale he ceases to dissimulate, always reveals his true identity, and finds that he has much to gain by doing so. An evil and mendacious vizier who almost succeeds in eliminating Amir Arsalan and working his will with Farrokh Leqa provides, in contrast, an effective foil to Amir Arsalan with regard to lying and telling the truth. Fourth, he learns to control his emotions and not act impulsively. Experience teaches him not to become rattled under stress after he fails several times to remain cool and greatly regrets his lapses. Fifth, he learns to take responsibility for his personal actions. Many instances of his personal failings bring terrible trouble and pain to Farrokh Leqa, but until very late in the tale he will not admit that he was at fault. Finally, in an emotional confrontation with Farrokh Leqa, he acknowledges that his behavior has brought on all of her difficulties, and goes on to say that he is glad that he strove hard and made up for these. Sixth, he learns the importance of sexual restraint. As a handsome and active youth he has ample opportunities to engage in sex with women and is aggressively pursued by one of them, but he refuses to give in. He and Farrokh Leqa even sleep naked in the same bed several times before they are married, but nothing more than hugging and kissing takes place. Only after they are officially married does he "satisfy his heart's desire" with her. His virtue in this regard is highlighted by the behavior of an enemy *efrit*, another foil, whose lustful behavior causes a major problem for Amir Arsalan. Finally, our hero even develops a rudimentary philosophy of human action. Toward the end of the book he says, "A person should strive as much as he can so that God will provide the means [for his success]; if I should sit at ease and drink wine, God would never provide the means [for me to succeed]."

In keeping with the conventions of its genre, *Amir Arsalān* presents a model for the education of a prince that is rooted in practice, not theory. It stresses physical action, bravery, moral uprightness, the value of practical experience in a larger world than the court, and respect and decency in his relations with women. Amir Arsalan is endowed from birth with a sense of justice and the ways of kingship (his *nezhād*) and with native intelligence and extraordinary physical qualities (his *gowhar*). In the acquisition of his *honor*, he learns the importance of foresight and a sense of responsibility for his actions, the proper use of his physical power, and the moral importance of respect for women. His unswerving will in pursuit of his beloved is, to be sure, an entirely personal concern, but it is the generic means to show how he earns and embodies the kingly qualities that Persian culture values.

In some ways this generic model is closer to Kay Khosrow's ideas on kingship in *Shāhnāma* than it is to the model we find in the courtly and intellectual literature. It cannot be accidental that this model remained popular with the general population for more than a millennium. This was a public that did not read the courtly literature. Their ideas of the ideal king must have derived partly from the traditional stories told to them by storytellers, and partly from the practical experience of being the subjects of royal power rather the holders of it. The stories they would have heard would have included ones from the national legend as embodied in versions of *Shāhnāma*, other stories passed on in the oral tradition, and the storyteller romances such as *Amīr Arsalān*.

Removed from its generic context, *Amīr Arsalān* seems to be yet another long, episodic tale told in popular language. If read against its generic background, however, its moral and didactic dimensions are revealed. This suggests that an awareness of the generic conventions that shape a literary text, and the expectations aroused by the genre, could open up new sources of material for historical research. The idea would not be to mine these stories for "historical facts" but to discover the values that a genre can preserve and transmit in a single example.

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